1: Bowen C-4 (1945-1947) 1951 MK2 Maritime Arabs MK2

[285] The diver holds onto another line to which is tied an open-weave palm leaf basket for 228 the oysters; sometimes the diver has the oyster basket tied to his waist or around his neck and has the line tied to his body. When the diver is ready to come up, he gives several tugs on the rope. Thus the diver does not have to waste his valuable energy in swimming up or down. When he first reaches the bottom, he attempts to go out perpendicularly from the boat, frantically plucking all the oysters he can see before his air gives out. The diver usually crawls on one hand and one foot, using the other foot to propel himself and his free hand to collect the oysters.

228 The divers wear a horn noseclip similar to a clothespin; this 292 keeps the water out of their noses and enables them to hold their breath longer. Sometimes a diver will stuff cotton or beeswax into his ears to keep the water out. A set of leather finger thimbles protects his fingers from coral and other sharp objects; he wears only a loin cloth. This is the equipment universally used in the Persian Gulf, whether the diver is out of Kuwait, Bahrein, the Trucial Coast, or Persia. These divers wear no goggles and many [164] have impaired vision from trachoma, so their efficiency is cut down considerably. It is strange that the Arabs have not added at least eye socket goggles, which the South Sea Island and Philippine pearl divers have eagerly accepted.

228 Alan Villiers states that the Kuwait pearl divers make ten 461 consecutive dives and then rest while a "substitute" makes ten; these two divers have the same attendant.[24] Divers in other parts of the Gulf work continuously, taking a rest all together at certain predetermined times, sometimes corresponding with prayer-time.

The diver stays under about a minute, then rests for two or three.[25] Ten dives would consume about three-quarters of an

[24] A. Villiers, *op. cit.*, p. 392.

[25] The average length of time that a diver stays under water has long been a controversial question. Alan Villiers (*op. cit.*, p. 392), who spent two months with the Kuwait pearling fleet, states that the divers averaged about a minute, ranging from 40 to 90 seconds. O'Shea (*op. cit.*, p. 137), spending some time among the Trucial coast pearlers, states that divers there remain under water from 40 to 75 seconds, also averaging about one minute. Whitelock (*op. cit.*, p. 43), who visited the Trucial coast pearl fisheries one hundred years ago, stated that the divers averaged about 40 seconds under water, but that he never saw them remain over a minute. Hugh Smith (*op. cit.*, p. 183) states that in the Ceylon fisheries the Arabs are the best divers, staying down from 60 to 75 seconds, with a normal maximum of 90 seconds, and that there is an authentic case of an Arab staying under 109 seconds in seven fathoms of water. In any

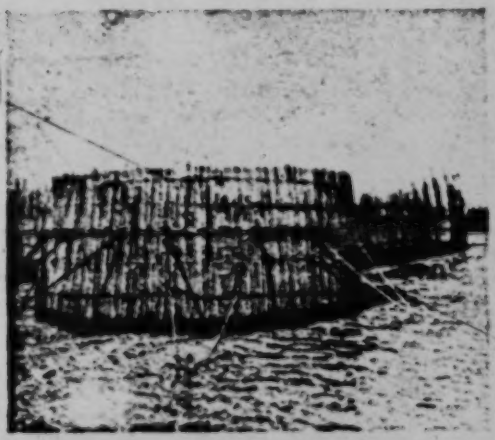

Fig. 8 (upper left)—The enclosure, or primary enclosure, of a fish-trap, encircled with rope and baited down to prevent large fish from breaking out.

Fig. 9 (upper right)—Working around the edges of the [illegible]ure with a fine-mesh hand net. Note the long burlap shirt, frequently worn by fishermen in colder weather.

Fig. 10 (lower left)—Transferring the fish from the hand net into a palm-leaf basket. Note the narrow entrance into the primary enclosure formed by the wings of the secondary enclosure; this entrance becomes narrower toward the bottom.

Fig. 11 (lower right)—Carrying the basket of fish ashore, slung from an oar. Fishtraps in the background.

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FIG. 26—Emar Nasir of Dasin with a woman's crop of pearls from his pearling jalboat.

Pearl oysters are found from low-tide level to 20 fathoms. There are pearl beds off the whole Arabian coast from Bahrein to Ras al Misha'ab, but the best banks are north and east of Bahrein Island, and the best beds between 5 and 10 fathoms. The beds are not charted; indeed, this would be useless, since they shift periodically. A bank may be sterile for several years and then suddenly produce the finest pearls of the season. The Arabs believe that the best pearls—the largest and whitest—come from deep water, though some of the more pessimistic say that the Persian Gulf never yields more than two first-class necklaces in any one season.

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The pearling boats leave Bahrein, Kuweit, and the Trucial Coast of Oman for the main season en masse to drum beating and chants, but the few dhows from the Saudi Arabian ports slip out unceremoniously. The Bahrein fleet works up, the Kuweit fleet works down, and the small Saudi Arabian fleet works in the middle.

The *nakhoda* (captain) of a pearling dhow orients his craft at the edge of a bed so that when the anchor line is paid out, the dhow will drift across the bed. When the divers start to get only a few oysters, the dhow is allowed to drift a little. When it is completely across the bed, the crew moves it back to a fresh location with the sweeps, to the accompaniment of drum beating and chants. It is here that the nakhoda shows his real skill and knowledge, for he must keep his craft in virgin water.

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Pearl diving in the Persian Gulf is essentially "skin diving." The diver wears only a loincloth and leather fingers to protect his fingers from sharp coral and shells; a horn noseclip and cotton or beeswax to stuff into his ears complete the "equipment." The use of drags, dredges, or compressed-air diving suits has been prohibited by the British, long the protectors of the Persian Gulf, and only the inhabitants of the Gulf—Arabs and Persians—can work the pearl fisheries.